

## THE SHAKERS

The Shakers trace their beginnings to Manchester, England, in 1747. They called themselves The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. They soon became known as Shakers because of the trembling, whirling, and shaking that affected them during their spiritually ecstatic worship services. As Millennialists, they believed that Christ's second coming was realized in their leader, Ann Lee, whom they called Mother Ann. Misunderstood and persecuted in their native England, the Shakers nonetheless gathered a small group of enthusiastic followers to their new Christian lifestyle and beliefs



In 1774, Mother Ann Lee made the monumental decision to lead eight Shaker converts on a journey to America, seeking the freedom to live, work, and worship according to their main religious tenets: celibacy, communal life, and confession of sin. The Shakers also believed in racial and gender equality, simplicity, and pacifism. They dedicated their lives to creating a working Heaven on Earth amidst the boundless opportunities presented by settlement of the New World.

(See biography of Mother Ann Lee on the last page)

The Shaker population reached its peak in the mid-19th century, with an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 Shakers. Today, the Shaker community remains active at Sabbathday Lake in Maine.



The Shakers are one of the most intriguing social and religious movements in American history. They are also one of the longest lived, and are considered by many to be the most successful of the hundreds of communal groups and utopian societies that have flourished in this country since before the Revolutionary War. As the Shakers grew in influence and in numbers in the 19th century, they challenged the existing social and religious structure and economic order of the new nation. Eventually developing an alternative lifestyle based on their religious beliefs, the Shakers have made important contributions to American culture including art, science, architecture, craftsmanship, business, music, education, government, medicine, agriculture, and commerce.

The small group of Shaker converts who left England on the ship *Mariah* seeking religious freedom in America arrived in New York harbor in 1774. Ann Lee and her eight Shaker followers soon purchased land and settled near Watervliet, New York, in the frontier wilderness northwest of Albany. While establishing a place to live in communal brotherhood and sisterhood at Watervliet (and also at nearby New Lebanon, New York), Mother Ann embarked on a series of missionary journeys throughout New York and New England, gathering many converts to this new Christian movement.

Mother Ann passed away in 1784, and one of her early English disciples, Father James Whittaker, assumed the leadership of the fledgling society. After Father James' death in 1787, Elder Joseph Meacham succeeded as the first American-born leader. Elder Joseph soon appointed another American-born convert, Mother Lucy Wright, to be his co-leader, and together they worked to gather the scattered groups of Brethren and Sisters into an expanding network of communal villages of Believers. Hancock was the third of what would eventually number nineteen major Shaker communities established between 1783 and 1836 in New York, New England, Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana.



**Person on Left is Mother Ann Lee**



Shaker Furniture

## **A Short History of ANN LEE (MOTHER ANN) (1736-1784)**

When Ann Lee was a child, she thought she was an angel in human form and stood in front of mirrors hoping to see her wings sprout. Later in life, she thought of herself as God's daughter, the sister of Jesus, and she saw God's feet on the horizon and heard his voice in the stars.

Born in Manchester, England, one of eight children, she went to work in a cotton factory when still very young. All her life she was illiterate.

Ann was married to an alcoholic blacksmith, by whom she had four children, all of whom died in infancy. The birth of the last child almost killed her. This experience probably influenced her attitude toward sex; she was against it, believing that it had caused humanity's fall. Ann's husband complained to church authorities that she refused him sexually; she scolded her own mother for what she called "carnal acts of indulgence." God, she felt, was male-female, capable of producing himself without nastiness, and human beings had been that way, too, before they sinned.

In 1758 Ann met James and Jane Wardley, leaders of a small group of radical English Quakers who became convinced that she was Christ come back as a woman. That same year, she was converted to the "Shaking Quakers." Under Ann's guidance, the movement grew stronger.

Ann was thrown in jail for her religious beliefs in 1770; in her cell she had more visions, in one of which she was told to go to America. Four years later, she sailed from Liverpool with eight others, one of them her husband (from whom she was separated). She hadn't been in America long before she and some of her followers were jailed for their pacifist stand on the Revolutionary War; it was 1780 before she was released.

A simple person, either blessed by God or a little insane depending on your point of view, she affected thousands of people, filling them with awe and inspiring devotion. One said, "Mother Ann's appearance seemed truly beautiful and heavenly ... such godly fear and heavenly love I never beheld in any person before ...." It was all "inner light," for Ann Lee was altogether a plain woman--thickset yet straight-backed, with keen blue eyes. She was able to perform miracles of healing, and many of her followers thought she was the mother of the race.



Shaker village in Enfield, CT